

## State prisons battle flu outbreak

GALESBURG — As this year's flu season hits its peak, five of the state's 29 correctional facilities are on lockdown to combat the spread of the H1N1 virus.

An update issued from the Illinois Department of Corrections cited 31 confirmed cases of the virus. Another 25 inmates are said to have displayed symptoms of the flu before testing negative for it.

Knox County's Henry Hill Correctional Center has yet to register a confirmed case of H1N1. The five centers on lockdown include Graham Correction Center, Lincoln Correction Center, Taylorville Correction Center, Illinois River Correction Center and Logan Correction Center.

DOC Director of Communication Tom Shaer calls this outbreak "unusual," and says the state's correctional centers have not seen such a widespread number of cases in roughly four years.

But Shaer also believes the system's 31 confirmed cases out of more than 48,000 inmates currently housed statewide speaks volumes about the quality of the state's correctional centers. For him, the DOC outbreak is a result of the state's level of confirmed H1N1 cases, which totals 216, according to the Illinois Department of Public Health.

"I think this outbreak is more of a reflection of what's happening throughout the state," Shaer added.

Viruses usually spread through a DOC facility via persons not associated with the center, like delivery workers, outside maintenance contractors and even the inmates themselves through prison transfers.

To prevent a virus from spreading, correctional centers are placed on lockdown, which includes restricting the movement of inmates and limiting visiting privileges. Entire housing units can also be quarantined except for medical visits and other necessary movements until symptoms pass.

Prison staff also place added emphasis on the cleaning of common areas and food preparation.

"Everything is done in a very sanitary way," said Shaer, who noted regular visits from healthcare professionals to changes in the inmates' diet are common throughout flu season.

Inmates are also offered flu vaccinations, though Shaer said only about 35 percent of inmates opt for the shot. Permanent prison staff also offered flu vaccinations as well in an effort to curb outside contamination.

Unlike the state system, inmates of the Knox County jail are not offered flu vaccines. But even so, Knox County Sheriff David Clague says the Knox County jail has not experienced any issue with H1N1 or similar viruses this year or last.

"We had a scare a few years ago," Clague said, "so we were prepared then. But nothing happened."

Clague said the lack of vaccinations is due in part to the lack of long-term inmates and the financial hardships the county would face.

"It's just the expense of it," Clague said. "Once someone is in our custody, everything is done at the county's expense."